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**Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations: An Overview and Assessment***

*Andrew Linklater and Stephen Mennell*

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## **Abstract**

Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process* which was published in German in 1939 and first translated into English in two volumes in 1978 and 1982 is now widely-regarded as one of the great works of twentieth century sociology. That volume attempted to explain how Europeans came to think of themselves as more civilized than their forebears and neighbouring societies. By analysing manners books that had been published between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, Elias observed changing conceptions of shame and embarrassment with respect to, amongst other things, bodily propriety and violence. To explain those developments, Elias analysed the interplay between the rise of state monopolies of power, increasing levels of economic interconnectedness between people and pressures to become attuned to others over greater distances that led to advances in identifying with others in the same society irrespective of social origins. The analysis of the civilizing process was not confined however to explaining changing social bonds within separate societies. The investigation also focused on the division of Europe into sovereign states that were embroiled in struggles for power and security. This article provides an overview of Elias's principal claims in the light of growing interest in this seminal work in sociology. The argument shows how Elias defended higher levels of synthesis in the social sciences to explain relations between "domestic" and "international" developments, and changes in social structure and in the emotional lives of modern people. The investigation, which explained long-term processes of development over several centuries, pointed to the limitations of inquiries that concentrate on short-term intervals. Only by placing short-term trends in long-term perspective could sociologists understand contemporary developments. This article maintains that Elias's analysis of the civilizing process remains an exemplary study of long-term developments in Western societies over the last five centuries.

**Keywords**

Norbert Elias, process sociology, the civilizing process, state-formation, violence, interconnectedness, human emotions

Linklater and Mennell

In the 1980s, Norbert Elias (1897–1990) wrote a largely overlooked paper on “the retreat of sociologists into the present”.<sup>1</sup> An important claim was that the shortening of horizons was a widespread affliction in the social sciences, with many perspectives focusing on developments over as little as a ten-year period. Enlightening though such work often was, it was necessary to lament the loss of longer-term perspectives that alone could make shorter intervals intelligible. Intellectual fragmentation and “over-specialisation” often proceeded with little concern for synthetic projects which increasingly risked incurring contempt.<sup>2</sup> Politically, there were costs because the tendency for synthesis to lag behind analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Norbert Elias, “The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present”, in *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009a), [Collected Works, vol. 16], 107–26. Elias developed this theme in many of his writings; see for instance the 1968 Postscript to *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000), 457–80. A new edition of Elias’s *magnum opus* will be published as volume 3 of the Collected Works (which are being published in 18 volumes (2006–13) by UCD Press, Dublin, Ireland), under the title *On the Process of Civilisation*; the revised title is closer to the German original (*Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*) and more appropriately places the stress on the word *process* rather than on *civilisation*. The Collected Works include many items that have not previously been published in English. Earlier English editions have also been carefully corrected and annotated. In this essay, references are given to volumes of the Collected Works that have already been published, but to older editions where they have not.

<sup>2</sup> Elias *The Court Society* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007a) [Collected Works, vol. 2], 55–8; Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 47–9.

obstructed the task of increasing human control over largely un-mastered social processes. It is important to add that Elias recognized that the large-scale synthesis could not progress without the advances that have occurred as a result of ever more specialised work. The issue was one of balance, and of restoring the grand narratives that had been advanced by such thinkers as Comte and Marx. Admittedly, their progressivism could no longer be defended. The critics had been right to protest against nineteenth century teleological history; the problem was that “the baby had been thrown out with the bathwater”.<sup>3</sup>

The recovery of long-term horizons is one of the main accomplishments of *The Civilizing Process*, first published in German in 1939 by an obscure émigré publisher in Switzerland. Its main purpose was to understand how, over roughly five centuries of development, Europeans came to the view that they were “civilized” while others were “barbaric” or languishing in a “savage” past. The analysis did not condone those self-images; the point was not to share in European self-congratulation, but to understand the processes that led to the sense of cultural superiority. The discussion was remarkable in its breadth and depth since it encompassed such apparently disparate topics as state-building and domestic pacification, the development of court society in France and across Europe more generally, changing relations between the nobility and the bourgeoisie, shifting conceptions of gender relations, sexuality and the relationship between adults and children, and the greater need for individual self-restraint as more and more humans became entangled in lengthening webs of interconnectedness. The last point calls attention to one of the most distinctive features of Elias’s position – that it was not a sociology of patterns of development within ostensibly separate societies, but an account of the relations between and across those social systems that amounted to a large-scale transformation of human society.

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<sup>3</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 468.

The scale of Elias's achievement is easier to understand by recalling the extent to which more recent accounts of state formation focus on structural changes, specifically shifts in for example the organisation of coercive power, alterations in property relations, modes of production. Such works – notably the extensive writings of Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol and Michael Mann – seldom refer to Elias's writings, and devote little or no attention to the transformation of human emotions.<sup>4</sup> Other writings have brought two of Elias's main interests, in the sociology of the body<sup>5</sup> and in the management of the emotions,<sup>6</sup> back to the

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4 More contemporary writings on state-formation have generally been concerned neither with building on Elias's account nor with criticising it. References to his work in the better-known works on the development of the state that have appeared over the last thirty years are almost entirely absent, even though *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* antedated them by several decades and was much broader in scope. The reason for this at first glance baffling omission is that – partly through Elias's own procrastination – *The Civilizing Process* was not published in English until four decades after it was written. Even then, the second volume dealing with state formation processes and bringing together the work as a whole, did not appear until 1982, four whole years after the first volume (which had appeared as *The History of Manners* in 1978). Moreover, the second volume was published under two different titles – the unauthorised and unprocessual *Power and Civility* in the United States, and *State Formation and Civilisation* in Britain. It is hardly surprising that a large proportion of social scientists, especially in America, evidently did not appreciate that these were two parts of the same book, and that the theory of civilizing processes could not be understood through either separately.

<sup>5</sup> Elias would have disliked the term “sociology of the body”, both because it uses “body” in the abstract and the singular, and – worse – because it expresses the traditional philosophical

center of sociological discussion; but they tend to ignore the ways in which such dimensions of human life have been affected by patterns of state formation, lengthening webs of interconnectedness, pressures to become better attuned to the interests of others over greater distance, and so forth. Elias focused on how the sociogenetic (structural dimensions of social life) and the psychogenetic (associated psychological traits) developed together over long-term intervals. The conceptual tools for analysing such inter-relations were largely missing in Elias's time – hence his remarks on the need for explorations in “historical psychology” or “historical social psychology” – avenues of inquiry that did not then exist. The framework was designed to trace significant shifts in emotional responses to violence and suffering; it was invented to track movements in emotions such as embarrassment and shame. The focus encompassed the evolution of the desire to conceal nakedness, growing embarrassment when faced with the dying and with death, and disgust at the public slaughter of animals and cruel

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mind–body dualism against which he argued throughout his academic life. Nevertheless, the two principal pioneers of the “sociology of the body”, Bryan Turner – see *The Body and Society* (Oxford: Sage, 1984) and Chris Shilling – see *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 1993) - have both shown a lively appreciation of Elias's work.

<sup>6</sup> The “sociology of emotions”, to which such eminent sociologists as Arlie Russell Hochschild and Randall Collins have contributed, now has its own section within the American Sociological Association. While broadly part of the American tradition of micro- or interactionist sociology, it is not unified by a single theoretical stance. A representative sample of early work in the field can be found in Theodore D. Kemper (ed) *Research Agendas in the Sociology of Emotions* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990).

practices such as judicial torture and capital punishment.<sup>7</sup> Its interest in changing orientations towards violence and suffering did not concentrate on shifting attitudes to relations with other members of the same community; the focus embraced attitudes to war and genocide, and responses to suffering in more remote parts of the world.<sup>8</sup> The range of inquiry remains unusually comprehensive in the social sciences; that is one of the main reasons for offering this overview of its central claims.

### **Aims and Method of *The Civilizing Process***

It is important to begin with some introductory comments about the nature of Elias's approach, which was to understand certain long-term processes, specifically the relationship between state formation and domestic pacification in Western Europe, the appearance of specialised functions as a result of urbanisation, monetarization and marketization, and the transformations of personality systems as people responded to the challenge of learning how to become more attuned to each other in the context of the extension of the webs of interconnectedness. The study aimed to comprehend changing attitudes towards violence as people became accustomed to levels of personal security that had not existed in the medieval world where, in the absence of a higher monopoly of power, warriors relied on their weapons for their security, and where the virtues that were intrinsic to the warrior code were rated

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<sup>7</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 136–42, 161–172; 178–9; Elias, *The Loneliness of the Dying and Humana Conditio* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010a) [Collected Works, vol. 6]; P. C. Spierenburg *The Spectacle of Suffering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Especially relevant among Elias's later writings is *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).

more highly than non-military values. The goal, Elias stressed, was not to build “a general theory of civilization in the air, and then afterwards to find out whether it agreed with experience”; it was “to begin by regaining within a limited area the lost perception of the process in question, the peculiar transformation of human behaviour, then to seek a certain understanding of its causes and, finally, to gather together such theoretical insights as have been encountered on the way”.<sup>9</sup>

The investigation was hostile to forms of reductionism that assumed, for example, in the case of Marxism, that social and political change could be reduced to one dimension of society – to what has come to be known as the economic. The point was to understand how changes in different social realms developed in tandem, each affecting the other in ways that escaped causal approaches that assumed that any single domain can bring about change on its own account, without collaboration between “forces”.<sup>10</sup> It was not, however, that Elias was comprehensively “anti-Marxist”; he makes clear that he learnt a great deal from his reading of Marx, and this is especially clear in his discussion of the monopolisation of the means of violence by growing state apparatuses. His principal criticism of Marx, as he explains in his essay “On the sociogenesis of sociology”, is that Marx – through his reading of the early classical economists – accepted that economic processes possessed structure, but despaired of finding structured processes of development in other spheres of society.<sup>11</sup> Marx indeed went further, assuming that any process that was structured was, by definition, economic. In a

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<sup>9</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 173–4.

<sup>11</sup> Norbert Elias, “On the Sociogenesis of Sociology”, in *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009b) [Collected Works, vol. 16], 43-69.

sense, Marx's stance anticipated that of later writers such as Elias's teacher Alfred Weber, who accepted that structured processes of development could easily be traced in the sphere of technology, but that "culture" underwent "movements" but not *development* in any specific direction.<sup>12</sup> Elias believed that in what he called civilizing processes he had discovered a structured process of development that could not meaningfully be reduced to the economic.

The focus of *The Civilizing Process* was on understanding unplanned processes; they may be said to have a structural or systemic quality, in that humans are moved along by forces that they do not control or necessarily comprehend. However Elias rejected systems analysis and preferred the notion of figuration to stress that those forces stemmed from the ways in which people were bound together and by the pressures that they placed on each other. The notion of a social system that stood apart from the main patterns of social interaction was regarded as profoundly misleading.<sup>13</sup>

It is also important to emphasise Elias's focus on understanding the emergent or

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<sup>12</sup> Katie Liston and Stephen Mennell, "Ill met in Ghana: Jack Goody and Norbert Elias on Process and Progress in Africa", *Theory, Culture and Society* 26 (2009), 1–19 have argued that something of the same assumption lingers in the mainstream of modern social anthropology, even for instance in the historically-orientated work of Jack Goody.

<sup>13</sup> See Elias, 2007, 153 on how the concept of "figuration" differs from that of "system"; he likened networks of interdependent human beings – "figurations" – to a dance: in constant flux yet structured. Dancers follow the rules of the dance but those rules cannot be said to stand outside the movements they make in relation to each other (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 482).

immanent potentials that reside in the ways in which humans are bound together.<sup>14</sup> The influence of Marx's approach to long-term processes of change is evident here. But it must immediately be added that Elias did not share Marx's belief that the purpose of social inquiry was to help release the progressive forces that are immanent in existing relationships. Elias was hostile to partisan social inquiry but not to the Enlightenment belief that one of the purposes of social sciences is to promote the understanding of how humans can live together more amicably.<sup>15</sup> But those goals were more likely to be realised, he believed, through detached inquiry rather than by overt normative commitments that jeopardised the acquisition of "reality-congruent" knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

Elias made it clear that the analysis charted "a field of investigation" and took no more than "the first steps towards an explanation".<sup>17</sup> He sought to establish secure foundations for future research that would need to integrate several specialised areas of research. Here it is worth noting that in later writings (such as *The Symbol Theory*, London: Sage, 1991 and *The Loneliness of the Dying*, in *The Loneliness of the Dying and Humana*

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<sup>14</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 312ff.

<sup>15</sup> See Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 446 on the importance of understanding the difference between those restraints that are necessary for a civilized society to function and those that simply exist to protect dominant interests.

<sup>16</sup> On Elias's conception of the development of *relatively more* reality-congruent knowledge, see *Involvement and Detachment* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007b) [Collected Works, vol. 8], and *Essays I: On the Sociology of Knowledge and the Sciences*, (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009c), [Collected Works, vol. 14].

<sup>17</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, xiii–xiv.

*Conditio* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010a) [Collected Works, vol. 6], Elias considered how the civilizing process had transformed human relations in different areas of life; they also greatly enlarged the original period of investigation by examining civilizing processes that had influenced humanity as a whole over thousands of years of development. That Elias was prepared to see such processes as unfolding over the whole course of human history and pre-history is one reason why the earth scientist Peter Westbroek has been able to see so clearly the irrelevance of the charge of “Eurocentrism” so often levelled at Elias by sociologists and anthropologists. Westbroek writes:

Elias took refuge in a method frequently applied in the natural sciences, although he likely arrived at this trick by mere intuition. The first biochemists for instance were confronted with a dazzling variety of phenomena. They wished to unravel the workings of all living organisms at the molecular scale, from bacteria to humans, whales and sequoia trees. Clearly, they would never be able to unravel the biochemistry of millions of different species. Yet they found a way out. They selected just one organism that was easy to handle experimentally, and simply assumed that all the rest would be more or less the same. Nature always repeats itself, was their motto. And so it came that *Escherichia coli*, a simple bacterium in our intestines, became the *model system* by which the biochemistry of all life was studied. And it worked! We now know that most of the principles underlying the molecular machinery of *E. coli* are common to all of life (apart from significant differences of course). This is how *E. coli* became the key to understanding our own molecular underpinnings.

So, what was to become the *E. coli* of humanity? Elias looked for a

fragment of history that could be studied in relative isolation, that was far enough back in the past to keep the involvement away, and that was well documented. After a long search, he chose a neat little subject – the transformation of etiquette in Western European post-medieval courts. The documentation was excellent, as he had manners books at his disposal from about 1350 onwards. As he found out, the changes in etiquette over that period had been dramatic. ... How could these changes be explained? Elias argued that they were associated with profound modifications of the power structure in society.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Rise of State Monopoly Powers**

Elias stressed that, although it was not apparent at the time, the slow crystallisation of monopoly structures was taking place from around the eleventh century in the area that had once been governed by the Frankish empire.<sup>19</sup> In Western Europe, absolutist monarchy and centralized government emerged from the medieval world as something that contemporary observers regarded as new and extraordinary. The antecedents of absolutist rule appeared in Italy during the Renaissance. But nothing in the experience of the two Venetian ambassadors who visited Paris in 1492 had prepared them for the level of success in monopolising the right of taxation that underpinned the growth of the “total superiority” of centralised powers that was being “revealed nakedly to the eyes of its astonished and embittered

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Westbroek, *Terre! Des menaces globales à l'espoir planétaire* (Paris: Seuil, 2009, 168-9). [Publication of the original English text is planned].

<sup>19</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 268, 344.

contemporaries”.<sup>20</sup>

The centralisation of functions was different from what had gone before and from what has been reported in many non-European regions.<sup>21</sup> In *The Court Society*, Elias studied

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<sup>20</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 355, 356–61, 542 note 128.

<sup>21</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 315 maintained that the development of state monopoly powers “is one of the prominent features of Western history”; moreover, the processes to which they gave rise, namely “the differentiation and specialisation of social functions have attained a higher level in the West than in any other society on earth”. Not that all other regions have been devoid of similar trajectories of development. In the case of China, Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 540, note 79 maintained that its “form of centralisation, when compared to that developed in Europe, is certainly very peculiar”, since here “the warrior class was eradicated relatively early and very radically by strong central authority”, and not least because of “the manning of the governmental apparatus by a bureaucracy ... that was wholly pacified”. “Courtly forms of civilization” penetrated down to village communities as result of the model-setting function of “a peaceful and scholarly officialdom” to whom “military activity and prowess” did not have high value. Although the Chinese civilizing process was different from that of the West, “the foundation of the cohesion of larger dominions in both cases was the elimination of freely competing warriors or land owners”. A comparative analysis of court societies was required to understand different civilizing processes; however, Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 388–9, 397 suggested that the analysis of court society, and the more specific inquiry into the “taming of warriors” and their “courtisation” – their transformation into courtiers – appeared to be the key to understanding not only the Western civilizing process but major civilization processes in all eras and places. The study of the European courts, which may seem to have little meaning for contemporary existence, could cast light

the workings of the French absolutist court from the reign of Louis XIV to the Revolution. *The Civilizing Process* is broader in scope, and may be considered a comparative study of developments in France, England and Germany.<sup>22</sup> But political fragmentation persisted in Germany much longer than in France and England; and although a unified English state emerged early, England was primarily a maritime power reliant on its navy, which, Elias argues, was less conducive to the emergence of absolutism.<sup>23</sup> It was especially the arrangements arising in France that would transform Europe as a whole as other societies sought to match its political and military strength, and to emulate its standards of “court rationality”. They would eventually alter the whole course of human development, first through the overseas empires that only modern states could establish and control, and second through a repetition of the imitative strategies that had occurred in Europe as ruling elites elsewhere imported the Western invention of the state to consolidate their power and compete with external rivals – while rejecting alien rule, they were gradually incorporated into wider

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on more general social processes, the point being that “the courtization of warriors ... is one of the most elementary social preconditions of every major movement of civilization” (also Elias, *Court Society*). On the larger issues regarding the relevance of Elias’s perspective for understanding non-European regions, see Johan Goudsblom, Eric Jones and Stephen Menzell, *The Course of Human History: Economic Growth, Social Process and Civilization* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 117–34. For more detailed discussion of Chinese history in the light of Elias’s theory of civilizing processes, see Andrew Stebbins, “The Chinese Civilizing Process: Eliasian Thought as an Effective Analytical Tool for the Chinese Cultural Context” (unpublished PhD thesis, Murdoch University, Australia, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> This is made most explicit at Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 261–7.

<sup>23</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Genesis of the Naval Profession* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007c).

economic and political interdependencies and related “elimination struggles”.<sup>24</sup> The overall process was marked by very uneven patterns of domestic pacification and external belligerence, and by a civilizing process that moderated (but usually to a limited extent) the forms of killing that were permissible in relations with other groups.<sup>25</sup> Previous outlets for pleasurable killing were gradually closed; societies with stable monopolies of power did not encourage the lust for aggression in their militaries; exhibitions of cruelty were regarded as contradicting the sentiments and dispositions that were integral to the civilizing process.

Ironically, the greater controls on violence in the relations among members of the same society were connected with the development of forms of increasingly destructive power between rival societies.<sup>26</sup> Processes of state formation are Janus-faced. One face is represented by processes of internal pacification, stabilization and integration of a territory. The other face consists of the concomitant external struggle for the acquisition of territory through warfare and other means. The two faces are inseparable because of what Goudsblom has called “the paradox of pacification”.<sup>27</sup> He quotes the old adage that “if you want peace, prepare for war”, but remarks that it is equally true that if you want to wage war with some chance of winning, you have to see to peace within your own ranks. State formation involves

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<sup>24</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 257–344.

<sup>25</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 235.

<sup>26</sup> See Norbert Elias, “Power and Civilization”, in *Essays II: On Civilizing Processes, State Formation and National Identity* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009d), [Collected Works, vol. 15], 93–104.

<sup>27</sup> Johan Goudsblom, *Stof waar honger uit ontstond: over evolutie en sociale processen* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2001), 104.

the organization of violence, and the paradox arises from the civilizing constraints that that organization entails. “Organized violence is generally far more effective than unorganized violence. To be effective, however, it requires a high degree of internal pacification. Those who participate in exercising it must not fight each other” (*ibid*).

The Venetian envoys that Elias referred to were aware they were witnessing something new, a state that possessed an extraordinary capacity to raise taxes, first calculating expenditure then raising the necessary income from the lower strata.<sup>28</sup> At that point, there was no clear division between state and royal household – the royal domain was still a personal reserve, but the long-term trend towards their separation was already under way.<sup>29</sup> The envoys discovered what Elias described as the “transformation” in which “*the territorial property of one warrior family, its control of certain lands and claims to tithes or services of various kinds from the people living on this land, was transformed with the advancing division of functions and in the course of numerous struggles, into a centralised control of military power and of regular duties or taxes over a far larger area*” (italics in original).<sup>30</sup> The centralised political structures were entirely novel in a society in which a

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<sup>28</sup> See Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 361. Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 356 added that their presence in Paris was evidence of growing interconnectedness between members of the international states-system, and of the need to monitor developments in more distant regions and to calculate their likely effects. The more general theme is a recurrent theme in his writings; see Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 300 on the incorporation of the “Franco-English territorial society” within the wider “encompassing” European area.

<sup>29</sup> See Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 357, 361.

<sup>30</sup> Elias *ibid*.

whole class could possess weapons and use them according to its inclinations; within the new area no-one could build fortifications or use weapons without the ruler's consent. Even "more novel" was the right of taxation that allowed central authorities to maintain their dominion without employing governing techniques that contained the danger of dividing the realm.<sup>31</sup> The puzzle awaiting solution was: "How did the extremely decentralized society of the early Middle Ages, in which numerous greater and smaller warriors were the real rulers of Western society, become one of the internally more or less pacified but outwardly embattled societies that we call states?"<sup>32</sup>

Marxists traditionally conceptualise this process in terms of a direct "transition from feudalism to capitalism".<sup>33</sup> Elias argued that the absolutist state represented an important and generally overlooked intermediate staging post in this process.<sup>34</sup> The summary explanation of

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31 The envoys would have been aware of the contrast with Venice where there were pronounced limits on the central power of taxation (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 356ff). The report expressed surprise that the French government first calculated its expenditure and then levied the necessary income through taxes – clearly not the practice in Venice where there were restricted possibilities for raising taxes.

<sup>32</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, xii.

<sup>33</sup> See Maurice Dobb, *Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Historians' Group of the Communist Party, 1963), Paul M. Sweezy and Rodney H. Hilton, (eds) *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1978), and Robert J. Holton, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>34</sup> Eric Dunning recalls a party in Leicester in 1968 at which the centerpiece was a discussion between Elias and Perry Anderson on precisely this point; Anderson's *Lineages of the*

how Europe had moved from the medieval order to a system of absolutist states stressed, first, the revolution in the sphere of taxation, and, second, the monopolisation of force that was linked with the military revolution, specifically the decline of cavalry and the power of the nobility as states used surplus manpower to create infantry armies; the supply of mercenaries broke the state's dependence on the "war services" of the noble class.<sup>35</sup> The two processes drove each other upwards: "again and again it was the military power concentrated in the hands of the central authority which secured and increased his control of taxes, and it was this concentrated control of taxes which made possible an ever-stronger concentration of military and political power".<sup>36</sup> The transition from barter to money economies was critically important since it enabled central authorities to "break out of the vicious circle that trapped the rulers of countries with barter economies".<sup>37</sup> In those polities, granting land to allies was a key strategy in the maintenance of royal power. The practice undercut monopolizing tendencies since the recipients of land acquired local power bases that could be used to mount challenges to the center, thereby blocking the rise of strong central authorities. The monetarisation of economic life made it possible for the first time for central authorities to pay single fees or salaries to hired officials – neither "the genesis nor the existence of

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*Absolutist State* was published in 1974 (London: New Left Books).

<sup>35</sup> See Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 192–4. Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 192–3 adds that the military revolution that followed those developments further worked to the advantage of central authorities: "through the slow development of firearms the mass of common foot-soldiers became militarily superior to the numerically limited nobles fighting on horseback". That transformation broke the nobility's "monopoly over weapons".

<sup>36</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 355.

<sup>37</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 314ff, 359.

“states”<sup>38</sup> can be understood without analysing the significance of that innovation. Central authorities were no longer forced to “pay for services from (their) own possessions which without expansion would sooner or later be exhausted”.<sup>38</sup> The rise of “money payment” transformed the possibilities for organising political power: “only then could the centrifugal tendencies be finally broken”.<sup>39</sup>

Elias stresses how astonishing that development was, given that it followed a prolonged period after the fall of Rome in which processes of fragmentation had led to a large measure of local political and economic autarky.<sup>40</sup> Feudalisation meant the wide dispersal of the right to own weapons and use force. The shift from the dominance of centrifugal to centripetal forces – which, at least in the region that was to become France is discernible from about the end of the first millennium – was connected with what Elias described as the “monopoly mechanism”.<sup>41</sup> Emergent central rulers were in conflict with one another for the control of territory, material resources and people. Each faced the alternative of conquering (or subordinating) neighbouring areas or being subdued by other polities which were similarly involved in processes of expansion that would replace free competition with monopolising tendencies.<sup>42</sup> Motives were often defensive, the aim being to secure control of

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<sup>38</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 360.

<sup>39</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 360. The Venetian ambassador’s 1546 report on developments in France drew attention to that marked contrast with the Italian experience (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 358–9).

<sup>40</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 195–256.

<sup>41</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 268–77.

<sup>42</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 305.

adjacent territory that might otherwise fall into the hands of rivals; in any case, given material restraints, expanding to the absolute limits was not an option for the polities involved.<sup>43</sup> But through such struggles, rivals stumbled towards defining the territorial limits within which, as

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<sup>43</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 312 remarks that what was said about the American pioneer also captured the heart of the French noble's aspirations: "He didn't want all the land; he just wanted the land next to his". Elsewhere, Elias describes the monopoly mechanism as similar to a social "law" which "when set in motion, proceeds like clockwork". His point was that in that condition, societies always face the choice of conquer or be conquered (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 305). But the reference to "clockwork" offered a hostage to fortune; it played into the hands of readers determined to misunderstand Elias's argument, such as the historian Geoffrey Barraclough, who in a review headed "Clockwork History" (Review of Vol. II of *The Civilizing Process*, *New York Review of Books*, 21 October, 1982, 36–8), accused Elias of having a mechanistic, deterministic, conception of the course of history. Such a reading is obtuse, for Elias constantly makes contrary comments such as "the course of events in reality is usually far more complicated than in this schematic pattern, and full of variations" (*Civilizing Process*, 270). What Elias meant was not that the monopoly mechanism was like the inexorable steady progress of a timepiece (since that clearly contradicts what he constantly says about it being a matter of probabilities), but that it was a bit like a clockwork toy which, once wound up, runs forward in a straight line across the carpet, unless it hits some obstacle, in which case it is halted or deflected. But it was an incautious remark, which he would have been unlikely to make later in his career, when he became very much aware of the deficiencies of language available for grasping the dynamics of social processes. By the 1960s, he thought "mechanism" as misleading in the social sciences as the idea of scientific "laws". Elias's actual view of the monopoly mechanism is much more subtle than the word "mechanism" (let alone "clockwork") suggests.

in the case France and England following the conclusion of the Hundred Years War, they could consolidate their respective monopolies of power.<sup>44</sup>

There were two sides to the monopolisation process: first, the concentration of power in fewer hands as a result of “elimination contests”; second, the development of the “collectivisation of functions” that slowly turned a relatively “private” monopoly into a “public one”.<sup>45</sup> Not least because of the need to administer the greater wealth provided by taxation, central authorities were compelled to establish a more complex state apparatus in which a rising number of officials performed specialist tasks in differentiated organs of government. The upshot was that, slowly and often imperceptibly to the actors involved, the ruling strata became ever more “dependent on their dependents”, and less able (than had been the case in the medieval era) to indulge their inclinations without regard for the wider system of constraints.<sup>46</sup> The long-term trend was one in which a “privately owned monopoly in the hands of a single individual or family comes under the control of broader social strata”, and is transformed by the process in which the state is turned into a “public monopoly”.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 301-2.

<sup>45</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 270ff.

<sup>46</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 270, 314ff.

<sup>47</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 271. Thus, as Pieter Spierenburg has pointed out in “Democracy Came Too Early: A Tentative Explanation for the Problem of American Homicide”, *American Historical Review*, 111 (2006), 104–14, in Europe even such a major democratic upheaval as the French Revolution did not challenge the *existence* of a monopoly of the means of violence and taxation, but only sought to “co-possess” it. In contrast, Spierenburg has suggested, “democracy came too early” to the USA – in the sense that a democratic

The power of the king was also influenced by the nature of the balance of power between the nobility and the bourgeoisie. Equipose – or what Elias called “the royal mechanism” – worked to the advantage of kings.<sup>48</sup> Royal strategy often aimed to ensure that neither class fraction acquired the upper hand. At least while the warrior nobility constituted the principal challenge to royal power, urban middle class interests were protected. Towards the end of the *ancien régime* in France, when the bourgeoisie had manifestly become an ascendant force in the land, the kings began to throw their weight into the scales on the side of the nobility. In the early phases of state formation, however, the modern division between the economic and political dimensions of social interaction did not exist, and the market was insufficiently developed to act as a counterweight to royal authority.<sup>49</sup> Reflecting patterns that were evident in the Italian cities, members of the urban classes often gained access to court positions as a result of their knowledge of Latin and Roman law; at the same time, the kings satisfied the nobles’ belief in their inherent superiority over the bourgeoisie by appointing them to courtly offices.<sup>50</sup> Crucially, what Elias described as the “ambivalence of interests” – a condition in which groups often display enmity towards each other but are so dependent on each other that there are strong imperatives to learn how to co-exist – helped knit diverse groups into a more

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constitution was adopted *before* a relatively effective monopoly had been established, and for that reason the legitimacy of such a monopoly has never been wholly accepted in America.

<sup>48</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 194, 331ff, 360ff; Elias, *Court Society*.

<sup>49</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 218–19. “Military action and political and economic striving were largely identical, and the urge to increase wealth in the form of land came to the same thing as extending territorial sovereignty and increasing military power” (*ibid*).

<sup>50</sup> Elias, *Court Society*; *Civilizing Process*, 332, 361.

integrated social web.<sup>51</sup> As a result of those processes, a new kind of political organisation emerged in Europe, one that broke free from the tensions between centralising and decentralising tendencies that had characterised the feudal polity, and one that revealed that it “is in the West that specialised central organs first attained a hitherto unknown degree of stability”.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Civilizing of Conduct**

The rise of the absolutist state set in motion a fundamental transformation of everyday drives that form a critical element in what Europeans have come to regard as their higher state of civilization.<sup>53</sup> With the rise of monopoly powers over force and taxation, and the “taming of warriors”, commercial activity was freed from the realm of coercion as the responsibility for using force fell to specialists in a more complex division of social labour. This promoted higher levels of interconnectedness and parallel self-restraints.<sup>54</sup> The essence of a civilizing process in Elias’s technical sense was a gradual tilting of the balance, over a period of generations, between external and internal constraints (*Fremdzwänge* and *Selbstzwänge* in

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<sup>51</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 318.

<sup>52</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 315.

<sup>53</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 190–1. Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 169 emphasises the more general relationship between “social structure and the structure of affects” in these terms: “if in this or that region the power of a central authority grows, if over a larger or smaller area the people are forced to live in peace with each other, the moulding of affects and the standards of the drive-economy are very gradually changed as well” in the direction of “reserve and mutual consideration”.

<sup>54</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 303.

Elias's original German terminology). Steady, consistent and predictable, but relatively gentle external constraints fostered the growth of relatively more automatic and even self-restraints. The “advance of the threshold of shame and embarrassment” (or of repugnance) – again from generation to generation – played a key role in this process of internalisation.

In the development of their collective self-images, the concept of civilization grew out of two earlier concepts that had played a central role in remoulding the self: *courtoisie* and *civilité*.<sup>55</sup> The main chain of events was released by the French absolutist court; it stood at the hub of a process that would circulate across the Western European region through personal ties and channels of communication that tied the courts together in a larger elite society.<sup>56</sup> Their wars and rivalries did not alter the fact that most courts were keen to emulate the style and manners of Paris; the majority identified more closely with that court than with the lower strata in their immediate environs until the bonds that linked them together were loosened

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<sup>55</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 40, 61, 87ff, 182 maintains that the three expressions, *courtoisie*, *civilité* and *civilisation*, symbolised the three stages in the larger social development. The first concept was central up to the sixteenth century; *civilité* steadily replaced it as the dominant term used in the courts during the seventeenth century, only to be replaced in turn by *civilisation* in the mid-1770s. The new concept, which found greatest support amongst the upper classes in France, was linked in the nineteenth century with the idea of a condition of almost innate superiority (its long formation having been forgotten), that had to be disseminated to the lower strata and to the members of other societies.

<sup>56</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 189ff. Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 255 refers to the feudal court as the first “society”, in that the limits on force, significant interweaving, and related patterns of self-restraint that distinguish modern states emerged there.

with the rise of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century.<sup>57</sup> Absolutism was therefore critical to “changes in human interweaving and interdependence in conjunction with which conduct and drive structure were altered in the direction of “civilization””; it was the key to understanding “the civilizing of conduct” and “the transformation of the structure of mental and emotional life”.<sup>58</sup> The relevant court societies intensified a trend that had already been evident in the earlier feudal courts where a significant number of nobles were brought together under the watchful eye of the “territorial lord”, and required to moderate conduct, speech and gestures given the range of “unwarlike administrative and clerical work that (had) to be done to promote effective government”.<sup>59</sup> But in the earlier period, the contrasts between the upper and lower orders were not as stark as they would become in the age of the absolutist courts; the behaviour of the lower strata was not regarded as “particularly repugnant”, whereas in the later period, the demands of greater refinement meant that “everything reminiscent of lower classes, everything vulgar, was kept at a distance”.<sup>60</sup>

Some of the more specific dynamics that led towards such superior, “civilized” self-images have already been noted. It is useful to comment further on the importance of the phenomenon that Elias described as “one of the most important structural characteristics of more highly developed societies, and a chief factor moulding civilized conduct”, namely the significance of the “ambivalence of interests” for the emerging codes of behaviour.<sup>61</sup> As

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<sup>57</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 189–90.

<sup>58</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 191, 205.

<sup>59</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 248.

<sup>60</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 421.

<sup>61</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 318.

noted above, the concept referred to a condition in which the nobility and the bourgeoisie were brought together in the courts in ways that required them to moderate mutual enmity and antagonism. A crucial motivation was the realisation that efforts to disadvantage others could rebound on the instigators by triggering responses that could endanger the social order on which all depended.<sup>62</sup> Those whose lives were interwoven in the courtly circles reached a collective awareness of the need for self-restraint in their relations with those who were partners as well as adversaries, but throughout they were inclined to “oscillate between the desire to win major advantages over their social opponents and their fear of ruining the whole social apparatus” on which their “existence depends”.<sup>63</sup> Central authorities were more able to exercise greater autonomy of action when the different strata were balanced in that manner, and not united by common interests and ambitions that could have a contrary effect. Indeed, members of the divided upper echelons relied on royal power to regulate the larger sphere of interaction. The hour struck for the “royal mechanism” when the nobility and the bourgeoisie were so evenly balanced that neither “a decisive compromise nor a decisive conflict” was possible between them.<sup>64</sup>

High levels of *attunement* between the balanced parties were no less important for the modern state’s defiance of the trend towards disintegration that had been commonplace in feudal polities. That important concept in Elias’s explanation of the state’s success in combining the growth of central functions with lasting political stability has not been

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<sup>62</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 362.

<sup>63</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 319.

<sup>64</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 326-7 where England is described as the only country in this period in which the nobility and bourgeois found common ground in opposition to the king.

analysed in detail in the recent literature. Its meaning ranges from the ordinary-language usage that notes that agents are accustomed to certain practices in their social environment, as in the claim that people in medieval times were “attuned to violence”. But that plain meaning needs to be distinguished from what might be called the negative and positive dimensions of learning how to co-exist with others; the former refers to the process in which social actors recognise that they must become more aware of the fears, needs and aspirations of others if they are to succeed in reducing their own insecurities, in promoting their interests, and in realising their hopes. Success in maintaining their power and status came to depend on the “permanent observation” of others, or on detached understanding of their actions, that made it easier to reach an accommodation with others, though not necessarily to eliminate enmity or distrust.<sup>65</sup> The more positive side of attunement involved a shift from the pragmatics of “reserve and mutual consideration” to a state of affairs in which the actors demonstrated a degree of “muted affection” for each other although that always existed in conjunction with “muted dislike”.<sup>66</sup> In the absolutist courts, that shared outlook owed a great deal to a sense of differentiation from the “uncivilized” lower orders, which blunted the effect of the fine distinctions that members of the nobility and the bourgeoisie often experienced in their relations with each other.

The more positive meaning of attunement is significant for understanding how members of the ruling strata came to identify, albeit weakly at first, with the hazy notions of France or England, and for analysing the gradual emergence of a sense of popular nationality

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<sup>65</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 379, 400.

<sup>66</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 169, 318.

or “national character”.<sup>67</sup> The trend towards identifying with others as social equals, irrespective of social origin, was also shaped by the processes of interweaving that drew more and more people into longer networks, and required them to become better attuned to living amicably with each other, in each of the two senses mentioned earlier. The movement of the civilizing process beyond the narrow circle of the court occurred as a result of the formation of a more complex social division of labour: as functions become “more differentiated”, so does “the number of functions and thus of people on whom the individual constantly depends”.<sup>68</sup> More and more “people must attune their conduct to that of others, and the web of action must be organized more and more strictly and accurately, if each individual action is to fulfil its social function”.<sup>69</sup> Increased personal security led to the expansion of webs of interdependence that required more automatic or habitual and “more *even* self-restraint”.<sup>70</sup> The domain of civilized self-restraints was partly the result of upper-class “civilizing offences” – themselves largely an expression of social superiority – to modify the behaviour of those they saw as their social inferiors, and partly the product of the outsider’s attempts to emulate the behaviour of the more “civilized” strata in order to reduce feelings of social

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<sup>67</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 196, 301, 547–8 n24; also Elias, *Germans*, and Norbert Elias, “Public Opinion in Britain”, in *Essays II: On Civilizing Processes, State Formation and National Identity* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008a), [Collected Works, vol. 15], 215–2. See also Norbert Elias, “National Peculiarities of British Public Opinion”, in *Essays II: On Civilizing Processes, State Formation and National Identity* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008b), [Collected Works, vol. 15], 230–55.

<sup>68</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 367.

<sup>69</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 367.

<sup>70</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 429, italics in original.

inferiority. At the same time, the more the bourgeoisie successfully emulated upper-class standards, the more the upper class had an incentive to elaborate still more demanding standards as a mark of their continuing claim to superiority. Elias refers to this concertina-like mechanism as one of “colonisation” and “repulsion”.<sup>71</sup>

We have seen that the balance of power between different fractions of the upper class allowed the kings to play a coordinating role, and that established groups took it upon themselves to initiate civilizing offences. However, the analysis of long-term trends was mainly concerned with emphasising how humans became pulled into certain relations and pushed into forms of refined behaviour by the constraints that were imposed on them. The argument stressed how the external restraints that were maintained by central authorities were augmented by internal restraints and patterns of self-regulation that had the quality of a “second nature” or “*habitus*”.<sup>72</sup> It also stressed the extent to which developments in that sphere were usually unplanned. Social actors found themselves drawn into processes that operated “behind their backs” and which they rarely understood.<sup>73</sup> In the case of the

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<sup>71</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 430.

<sup>72</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 109, 117. *Habitus* was a word in common use among German academics in the early twentieth century; Marcel Mauss also used *habitus* in French. Elias used the word when writing in German, but in the earlier English editions of his work it was translated by phrases such as “personality makeup”. The word was later popularised by Pierre Bourdieu.

<sup>73</sup> Elias *Civilizing Process*, 312 maintained that the expansionist tendencies that are highly probable where there is no higher monopoly of power, and when social actors are therefore largely responsible for their own security, show how “from the interweaving of countless

movement of civilisation in Western Europe, those processes led to a decline in the value attached to military skill and prowess.<sup>74</sup> That trend was evident in the feudal orders where the need for clerical skills introduced a dynamic that would be intensified in the later phases of state formation.<sup>75</sup> Certain “immanent” tendencies were apparent in the raised status of women in the courts while the social importance of the warrior declined.<sup>76</sup>

Manners books that appeared between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries were the principal sources of evidence of changing sensibilities towards the body and basic “natural

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individual interests and intentions ... something comes into being that was planned and intended by none of these individuals, yet has emerged nevertheless from their intentions and actions”. Elias goes on to say that is “the whole secret of social figurations, their compelling dynamics, their structural characteristics, their process character and their development” (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 196).

<sup>74</sup> With monopolisation and growing interconnectedness, physical strength lost its importance for the individual’s success: “Martial success was a necessary precondition of success and prestige for a man of the nobility”, but as human interweaving increased, those attributes came to be regarded as outmoded; “profession and money (became) the primary source of prestige”, and “middle-class traits” emerged as important means of succeeding in the face of the new social realities (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 243, 405, 425ff).

<sup>75</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 303.

<sup>76</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 142ff. Elias *ibid*, 312 draws attention to the importance of understanding how far later phases in the development of the civilizing process were “immanent” in the earlier phases of court-formation.

functions”.<sup>77</sup> In the Middle Ages, such changes were so slow as to be almost indiscernible. But by the Renaissance, Caxton’s *Book of Curtesye* [1477] shows that contemporaries were by then *aware* that social standards were changing: “Thingis whilom used ben now leyd aside / Thingis sometyme allowed is now reprud” – things that were once permitted are now forbidden.<sup>78</sup> Erasmus’ writings were given special attention because they defined the new standards of civility for the second quarter of the sixteenth century.<sup>79</sup> They allowed the analyst to document evolving emotional responses across different fields of social activity, the assumption being that conceptions of the cultivated sense in each field embodied larger patterns of societal development.<sup>80</sup> By way of illustration, the practice of moving the slaughter and carving of animals “*behind the scenes of social life*”,<sup>81</sup> was evidence of “the gradual transformation of behaviour and the emotions, the expanding threshold of repugnance” with respect to the “animal” side of the self that was increasingly suppressed.<sup>82</sup> The use of the fork became widespread as a result of distaste for “dirtying one’s hands”; regulations governing the use of the knife (which had been “a weapon of attack” and was now “a symbol of death and danger”) revealed how “society at this time was more and

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<sup>77</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, part two.

<sup>78</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 104.

<sup>79</sup> In particular, the pamphlet, *De civitate morum puerilium* (On Civility in Boys), that appeared in 1530 gave civility its “specific meaning” at that time (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 47).

<sup>80</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 60, 103ff.

<sup>81</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 103, italics in original; see also Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (London: Allen Lane, 1983).

<sup>82</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 71, 102.

involved in limiting “the real dangers threatening people”.<sup>83</sup> Other changes in the larger figuration included new standards of propriety with respect to spitting and nose-blowing; they marked the appearance of new protective barriers between the self and others, both “repelling and separating”; they displayed feelings of revulsion at “the mere approach of something that has been in contact with the mouth or hands of someone else”, and shame or embarrassment when one’s own natural functions are “exposed to the gaze of others”.<sup>84</sup> Changes in feelings of shame with regard to the body were apparent in the trend towards the “civilization of the sex drive”, and in the concealment of nakedness;<sup>85</sup> changing conceptions of embarrassment were evident in a growing “conspiracy of silence about sexual matters when in the company of children, lest contact with the “vulgar” features of life result in a “soiling of the childish mind”.<sup>86</sup>

Other manifestations of the “expanding threshold of repugnance” were evident in changing attitudes to violence: in regarding certain practices (such as cat-burning on Midsummer Day in Paris in the sixteenth century that had provided “visual satisfaction”) as cruel and barbaric.<sup>87</sup> The growing pacification of society led to stricter controls on violence.

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<sup>83</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 103ff.

<sup>84</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 60, Part Two, chs 6–7. Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 98, 107, 134 maintains that such barriers and prohibitions had “very little to do with the danger of illness”, and adds that concerns about “hygienic correctness” emerged later to reinforce demands for greater individual self-regulation.

<sup>85</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 142ff.

<sup>86</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 148.

<sup>87</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 171.

Using force was no longer an individual entitlement, as in the Middle Ages; as part of its public monopolisation, the right to inflict violence was conferred on a class of officials, such as the police dealing with criminals, who were expected to observe civilizing restraints.<sup>88</sup> Efforts to pacify society included measures to restrict or prohibit duelling.<sup>89</sup> In general, “the use of physical violence now recedes from human intercourse; force becomes “confined to barracks”, and is released from that “storehouse” in the extreme circumstances of “war or social upheaval”.<sup>90</sup> All those changes reflected the larger movement discussed earlier, specifically the shift away from the open contempt for lower orders that was endemic in barter economies where “war, rapine, armed attack and plunder constituted a regular form of income for the warriors”;<sup>91</sup> they reflected the pacification of social life, the tighter interweaving of persons, and the need for greater self-regulation and restraint under conditions in which the members of upper and lower strata found it easier to identify with each other.<sup>92</sup> The tilt towards civility also left its mark on emotional responses to warfare. Individuals were no longer required to cultivate a readiness for aggression; indeed such dispositions were regarded as unsuited to the new forms of military struggle that required not joy in killing but the same pattern of restraint that was required by individuals with

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<sup>88</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 169–70.

<sup>89</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 246, 398; Elias, *Germans*, 50ff.

<sup>90</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 372, 398.

<sup>91</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 239, 317.

<sup>92</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 175, 177; part four, ch. 3. Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 383 argued that the trend towards diminishing social contrasts, and the greater “commingling of patterns of conduct” that have their origins in different strata groups was “one of the most important peculiarities of the “civilizing process”.

specialised tasks elsewhere in the social division of labour.<sup>93</sup> Elias was fond of citing the story (from Ranke) of the Duc de Montmorency, who rebelled against the king in 1632.<sup>94</sup> Finding himself confronting the royal army in what should have been a strong position for him, his furious impulse to give battle could not be restrained even long enough to move his guns and troops into position. He galloped forward with a few followers, was easily cut down by the royal forces, and was put on trial and beheaded shortly afterwards. At this late stage in the process of courtisation of warriors, foresight and self-control even in battle had become far

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<sup>93</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 170 where it is maintained that “the necessary restraint and transformation of aggression cultivated in the everyday life of civilized society cannot be simply reversed, even in these enclaves. All the same, this could happen more quickly than we might suppose, had not the direct physical combat between a man and his hated adversary given way to a mechanized struggle which required a strict control of the affects. In the civilized world, even in war individuals can no longer give free rein to their pleasure, spurred on by the sight of the enemy, but must fight, no matter how they may feel, according to the commands of invisible or only indirectly visible leaders against a frequently invisible or only indirectly visible enemy. An immense social upheaval and urgency, heightened by carefully concerted propaganda, are needed to reawaken and legitimize in large masses of people the socially outlawed drives, the joy in killing and destruction that have been repressed from everyday civilized life”. The long-term towards confining the “enclaves” in which aggressiveness was allowed free play was accompanied by a general civilizing trend towards the dampening of aggressive impulses. War became impersonal (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 170). The cruelties of the wars of the seventeenth century came to represent the barbarism of an earlier age.

<sup>94</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 404–5; Elias, *Court Society*, 210–11.

more indispensable than in medieval times. As noted earlier, the whole movement of society was encapsulated in Caxton's remark that "things that were once permitted are now forbidden"; that statement, which identified the "expanding threshold of repugnance" in different spheres of existence, could stand as "a motto for the whole movement that is now coming".<sup>95</sup>

### **The Growth of Human Interconnectedness**

In the course of a civilizing process, societies become more tightly organized and also more separate from each other; inner dynamics cannot be distinguished from political patterns in the relations between states. More accurately, the study of civilizing processes is also an examination of how social units reached a point in their development when it seemed natural to distinguish between the world "inside" their borders and the world that lay beyond them. The discussion shows how a new kind of political unit gradually came into existence, one that maintains that the military and other relations between the new territorial states must be understood in connection with monopolising tendencies in the phase that preceded, but did not end with, their formation.<sup>96</sup> The first steps towards larger monopolies of power taken between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries would lead to a European continent divided between territorial units that continued to be caught up in power struggles and "elimination contests" which might not end until humanity is brought under the dominion of a "worldwide monopoly of physical force" that proceeds to pacify world society.<sup>97</sup> There is a parallel between Elias's claim that there is a "high degree of probability" that rivalry and conflict in

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<sup>95</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 70–1.

<sup>96</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 284.

<sup>97</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 254, 287, 445–6.

anarchic orders will lead to a new power monopoly and twentieth century realist/neo-realist theories of international relations although, it should be stressed, Elias did not share their respective ontological and methodological assumptions.<sup>98</sup>

The same process – the monopoly mechanism – explained the emergence of the first territorial concentrations of power in Western Europe and the struggles between rivals that

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98 Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 264. Realist explanations that reduce power struggles between states to attributes of human nature are guilty of the psychological reductionism that explains social relationships in terms of libidinal drives “without history” (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 409). Though greatly influenced by Freud, Elias rejected his belief that certain natural libidinal impulses lie beneath the veneer of civilization, awaiting the first opportunity to break out. Neo-realist explanations of how the systemic character of world politics compels states to compete for power and influence would appear to be closer to Elias’s position (for further discussion of realist and neo-realist approaches, see Jack Donnelly, “Realism”, in *Theories of International Relations*, ed. S. Burchill and A. Linklater (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). However, Elias *Civilizing Process*, 482 rejected systems analysis in the social sciences on the grounds that the concept of system, while not devoid of value, “is prejudiced by the associated notion of immutability”. He (*Civilizing Process*, 210, 455–7) criticised the frequent practice in the social sciences of proceeding with “a process-reducing attitude” and employing concepts that lack “process-character” – of explaining phenomena “in terms of something that remains unchanged” or “immutable”, or reducing “everything variable to something invariable”. That said, parallels between the realist belief that states tend to be drawn into geopolitical struggle, as a result of separate efforts to ensure their security and survival, and Elias’s views on elimination contests and the monopoly mechanism are undeniable.

have incorporated more and more human beings in longer webs of interconnectedness that now extend across the whole world.<sup>99</sup> The rise of ever larger monopolies of power was central to that process, as was the formation of the main European empires and the appearance of wars that are conducted on a world stage.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 437; also 304ff.

<sup>100</sup> See also the claim about the “first outlines of a worldwide system of tensions composed by alliances and supra-state units of various kinds, the prelude to struggles embracing the whole globe, which are the precondition for a worldwide monopoly of physical force” (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 445-6). It was therefore conceivable that hegemonic powers or blocs would develop that replicated some of the functions of the royal mechanism in the absolutist state (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 318). But the possibility that they would fragment could not be ruled out. The empire of Charles V collapsed because bankruptcy resulted from over-reach; to an author writing in the 1930s, the sprawling British Empire was “dangerously large” and facing the collapse into independent political units that seemed to be the destiny of entities that emerged from “conquest and colonization” (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 262, 266). But the overall tendency towards ever-larger territorial monopolies of power, and towards “unions of states”, would be more than a new stage in the development of larger territorial concentrations of power; as with all extensions of social and political interdependence, they could be accompanied by new patterns of civilization and self-restraint (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 254). Whenever interdependencies become more extensive, Elias, *ibid* argued, “the moulding of behaviour and of the whole emotional life, the personality structure” of individuals has also changed. That is the psychogenetic counterpart to sociogenetic changes in levels of “human integration, increased differentiation of social functions ... and the formation of ever-larger units of integration on whose fortunes and movements the individual depends”, whether or not s/he is aware of it. But, as noted, the discussion emphasised that

Economic exchange between relatively pacified societies has promoted the trend towards “worldwide interweaving” that is evident in “an interdependent system of countries ... within which each shift of power directly or indirectly (involves) every unit, every country”.<sup>101</sup> No matter how much, for example, the victor in war wishes to reduce the enemy’s military capacity, none can escape the reality that they are tied together “in the production line of the same machinery”, and that “sudden and radical change in one sector” can cause disruption elsewhere.<sup>102</sup> The question therefore arises of whether an international counterpart to the national “ambivalence of interests” can exercise a civilizing role in relations between societies, even in the absence of a higher monopoly of power.<sup>103</sup>

Struggles for power and dominance do not cease with rising levels of human interconnectedness: indeed, the interweaving of societies introduces forms of conflict and competition that did not exist previously.<sup>104</sup> However, “the inevitable conflicts grow

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“monopoly formation does not happen ... in a straight line” (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 302).

Trends towards disintegration were no less “immanent” than the trends towards monopolisation in the social and political systems with which Elias was primarily concerned (see Elias 2000: 312ff and 535).

<sup>101</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 300.

<sup>102</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 318.

<sup>103</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 410, 445-6.

<sup>104</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 370–1.

increasingly risky” for the “precarious system of nations”,<sup>105</sup> and many become more inclined “to resolve future interstate conflicts by less dangerous means”. Societies are forced into a realisation of the interdependence of national fates, and they come under pressure to observe patterns of restraint even though “the division of functions” between societies – and therefore the level of integration – are less developed in that sphere than in national social systems.<sup>106</sup> It had become valuable to learn how to see oneself “from a greater distance”, and to acquire a more detached understanding of one’s place in longer chains of human interdependence.<sup>107</sup> But any supposition that higher levels of detachment, foresight and self-regulation are inevitable had to be resisted. Societies were forced to confront the need for higher levels of coordination but, at the same time, feared the possible loss of power, autonomy and prestige.<sup>108</sup> Within national societies, the civilized restraints on human conduct could crumble quickly under conditions of fear and insecurity.<sup>109</sup> What there were in the way of civilized

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<sup>105</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 318.

<sup>106</sup> Elias *ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 440.

<sup>108</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 314, 437.

<sup>109</sup> One lesson that could be drawn from European history was that the civilizing depends on “a relatively high standard of living and a fairly high degree of security”; people “living in permanent danger of starving to death or of being killed by enemies” can hardly be expected to develop “a stable superego agency” or to observe the “restraints characteristic of the more civilized types of conduct” (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 428–9). We should not forget that “the armour of civilized conflict would crumble very rapidly...if the degree of insecurity that existed earlier were to break in upon us once again, and if danger became as incalculable as it once was. Corresponding fears would soon burst the limits set to them today” (Elias,

restraints in the relations between states were especially precarious under such conditions, particularly given the absence of a higher monopoly of power.<sup>110</sup> Higher power monopolies could disintegrate into the anarchy of competing centers of military and political power.<sup>111</sup>

But certain features of the civilizing process had already been globalized. As noted earlier, in the earlier phases of European development, certain patterns of self-restraint

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*Civilizing Process*, 441, 532). See Stephen Mennell, “Decivilizing Processes: Theoretical Significance and Some Lines for Research”, *International Sociology* 5 (1990), 205–23 on the difficult concept of decivilizing processes.

<sup>110</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 410 observed that foreign policy actors in the more industrialised societies tend to assume that all operate under the same restraints, and added that there is much work to do to create “effective political dialogue and cooperation” between social systems with their different civilizing processes and levels of development.

<sup>111</sup> Elias’s whole analysis of the unplanned emergence of monopolies of power and taxation, and of the integrating role of the ambivalence of interests, invites the conclusion that such structures and patterned relationships are always vulnerable to assault. Social groups have demonstrated only a limited ability to control the processes of integration. The precarious nature of future experiments in global coordination is almost guaranteed by continuing loyalties – that seem likely to continue into the foreseeable future – to existing survival units. Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 551 stressed how “natiocentric traditions” and patterns of socialisation block the path towards the further widening of the scope of emotional identification. He added that the difficulties will persist as long as large numbers of people have a begrudging disposition towards larger political unions, and perceive them as “rational” but as lacking “emotional significance for them”.

emerged amongst the secular upper classes and particularly in the courts. With the pacification of society and the emergence of long-distance trading networks, the need for similar patterns of self-regulation spread to other sections of society, and indeed in the most recent period to the members of other societies.<sup>112</sup> As of the nineteenth century, Western notions of civilized conduct were transmitted across the world as the ideas of the imperial ruling strata spread to the belief-systems in the colonies.<sup>113</sup> In that way the intra-European civilizing process unleashed patterns of development that continue to radiate out from the initial center: the “incipient transformation of Occidental and African peoples in the direction of Western standards represents the last wave of the continuing civilizing movement that we are able to observe”.<sup>114</sup> That change had to be understood in conjunction with the longer process of civilization that had occurred in Europe over roughly five centuries. Those comments revealed how the interplay between national and international forces had brought about a fundamental transformation of *human society*.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 380.

<sup>113</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 381ff, 428.

<sup>114</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 386.

<sup>115</sup> The deeper point is that the development of the civilizing process was a transnational phenomenon – the court societies of Europe were interlinked, and the state-building process and the pattern of relations between states were both influenced by that development. States did not first develop civility within their territorial borders and only then turn to how civility could be promoted in relations between them. Nor did they make whatever progress they were capable of at the time in creating civil statecraft within an emerging international society before considering how they should behave towards less “advanced” peoples. Those movements occurred in tandem, each circling the others in relations of mutual influence

### **The Significance of *The Civilizing Process* Today**

*The Civilizing Process* has come to be regarded as one of the classics of European sociology – one of the last synoptic works that belongs to the classical sociological tradition to which Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber belonged. It would be curious if a work of such range and ambition had not attracted its share of criticism from specialists. As its fame has grown, the work has been criticised from different angles, although it remains true that a major assessment of the work as a whole still lies in the future.<sup>116</sup>

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(although the relative importance of each “level” for the longer civilizing process undoubtedly shifted over time and varied from place to place). The analysis finds support in more recent International Relations scholarship. Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds) *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, 6–7) note that the “evolution of the European system of interstate relations and the expansion of Europe across the globe were simultaneous processes ... which influenced and affected each other. Both began at the end of the fifteenth century”. But that should not be taken to mean that states were already fashioned. As J. A. Fernandez-Santamaria argues in *The State, War and Peace: Spanish Political Thought in the Renaissance, 1516–1559* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 1), the formation of the Spanish state co-existed with its emergence as the nucleus of an expanding empire and with its location in an evolving “international community of sovereign states”.

<sup>116</sup> There have, however, been a number of preliminary treatments of his work; see Stephen Mennell, *Norbert Elias: Civilization and the Human Self-Image* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). [Revised paperback edition published under the title *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*, 1992; reprinted Dublin: UCD Press, 1998], Jonathan Fletcher, *Violence and Civilisation: An Introduction to the Work of Norbert Elias* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), Robert van

There is no space to do more than analyse a few areas of discussion. The first is the criticism that Elias was committed to a progressivist or Whig interpretation of history. In a review, the anthropologist Sir Edmund Leach sneered that at the very time that Elias was formulating his thesis, “Hitler was refuting the argument on the grandest scale”.<sup>117</sup> The same idea was elaborated by Zygmunt Bauman in his thesis about the relationship between modernity and the Holocaust in which it is alleged that the mass slaughter of the Nazi period demonstrated the essence of the civilizing process. The argument is based on a misrepresentation of Elias’s position.<sup>118</sup> Although it is true that Elias believed there had been advances in the modern world,<sup>119</sup> he stressed that civilizing processes are always attended by decivilizing dangers and tendencies. One might add that Elias has the advantage over

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Krieken, *Norbert Elias* (London: Routledge, 1998), and Richard Kilminster, *Norbert Elias: Post-Philosophical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>117</sup> Edmund R. Leach, “Violence”, *London Review of Books* (23 October 1986).

<sup>118</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989). Elias, *Civilizing Process*, xiv-xv maintained that the issues with which he was concerned had their origin less in scholarly tradition than in “the experiences in whose shadow we all live, experiences of the crisis and transformation of Western civilization”. He added that civilized societies become entangled in difficulties that other societies did not face – despite, or more accurately because of, the progress they have made in controlling the use of physical force (Elias, *Civilizing Process*, xiv). For further discussion, see Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell, “Elias on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust: On the Balance between “Civilizing” and “Decivilizing” Trends”, *British Journal of Sociology*, 49 (1998), 339–57.

<sup>119</sup> See Elias, *Germans*, 24–5.

Bauman's analysis because it locates the rise of Nazism in the long-term development of the German process of state formation and industrialisation, noting how the liberal-humanist values that the rising middle classes had espoused in the eighteenth century gave way to the aristocratic code and the celebration of military power and strength. Elias maintained that the Holocaust was not out of keeping with certain aspects of the structure of modern industrial societies (and here there is a degree of convergence with Bauman's argument).<sup>120</sup> But his essential claim was that Nazism represented the "regression" from civilization to barbarism – and that the feelings of revulsion that emerged once the scale of the Nazi atrocities were known revealed the power of "civilized" attitudes to violence.<sup>121</sup> Enough has been said to show that Elias did not regard modern civilization as an end-point or "pinnacle".<sup>122</sup> Only when the "tensions between and within states have been mastered", he argued, will humanity earn the right to regard itself as "more truly civilized"; and he ended his book by quoting Holbach's remark that "*la civilisation ... n'est pas encore terminée*".<sup>123</sup> At the very end of his life, Elias could still predict that in later centuries the age through which he had lived would

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<sup>120</sup> Elias, *Germans*.

<sup>121</sup> The opening section of *The Civilizing Process* compared the German concept of *Kultur* with the French notion of civilization. Whereas civilization was regarded as transcending national boundaries, and as having an expansionist role, *Kultur* emphasised the importance of establishing a distinctive national identity (see Elias *Civilizing Process*, 5ff on the differences between those concepts and their significance for the different paths of German and French development).

<sup>122</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 445.

<sup>123</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 446–7.

probably be seen as that of the “late barbarians”.<sup>124</sup>

More specific lines of criticism have focused on Elias’s portrayal of the Middle Ages and on the contrasts he drew between the medieval and modern *habitus*. Some have argued that Elias failed to discuss the influence of twelfth-century courts and early manners books on the civilizing process.<sup>125</sup> In fact, Elias refers to twelfth century antecedents of a civilizing process whose pace quickened during the fifteenth century. They had to be understood alongside Elias’s claim that there is no “zero point” as far as the civilizing process is concerned – no phase where barbarism was replaced by a process of civilization. One might regard the critical comments as pointing to important ways in which Elias’s research can be taken further.

A recurrent criticism of Elias’s work which is worth noting in this context is that he neglects religion and its supposedly civilizing role. This point was raised in one of the earliest reviews of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* by his friend Franz Borkenau,<sup>126</sup> and the matter

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<sup>124</sup> Elias, *Symbol Theory*, 146–7.

<sup>125</sup> See C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideas, 939–1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), M. Vale, *The Princely Court: Medieval Courts and Culture in North-West Europe, 1270-1380* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and J. Nichols, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985).

<sup>126</sup> Franz Borkenau, Reviews of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, vol. I, *The Sociological Review*, 30 (1938–9), 308–31, and vol. II, (1938-9), 450–2.

is discussed again by Turner.<sup>127</sup> Actually, the cumulative index to the Collected Works now taking shape reveals that Elias discusses religion in many parts of his writings, although the references are quite scattered. The upshot is Elias recognized that religious *organization* may have played a part in exerting civilizing pressures; he treats princes of the church as no different from secular princes in the feudal power struggles out of which processes of state formation arose.<sup>128</sup> They had their part in the play of *power*. In that respect the institutions of the church were no different from the developing institutions of the state. The church's (armed) monopolisation of the means of orientation was an important adjunct to the state's monopolisation of the means of violence.<sup>129</sup> The symbiosis of priests and warriors has been an near-universal feature of the development of agrarian societies.<sup>130</sup> Elias contends, "Religion ... never has *in itself* a "civilizing" or affect-subduing effect. On the contrary, religion is always exactly as "civilized" as the society or class which upholds it".<sup>131</sup> That is to say, while the power of religious *institutions* cannot be overlooked, Elias dismisses religious

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<sup>127</sup> Bryan S. Turner, "Weber and Elias on Religion and Violence: Warrior Charisma and the Civilizing Process, in *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*, ed. S. Loyal and S. Quilley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>128</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 187.

<sup>129</sup> See especially the essay on "Scientific Establishments", in Elias, *Essays I*, 107–60.

<sup>130</sup> See Johan Goudsblom, "Ecological Regimes and the Rise of Organized Religion" and "The Formation of Military–Agrarian Regimes", in *The Course of Human History: Economic Growth, Social Process and Civilization*, ed. J. Goudsblom, E. Jones, and S. Menell (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 31–62.

<sup>131</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 169 our italics.

*beliefs* as a civilizing force.<sup>132</sup>

More complex are arguments that Elias exaggerated the differences between medieval and modern people, and specifically misunderstood the role of anger in the Middle Ages. The question centers on how far anger and aggressiveness were part of the *habitus* of ordinary people and how far they were a calculated response to dangers of violence. Whereas Elias inclined to the view that displays of anger were a manifestation of low levels of emotional self-control and of rapid swings from joy to cruelty, others have regarded them as having the vital strategic role of calling attention to fundamental injustices that had to be addressed and solved.<sup>133</sup> Elias regarded anger as typical of warriors, others maintain that it

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<sup>132</sup> Johan Goudsblom, “Christian Religion and the European Civilizing Process: the Views of Norbert Elias and Max Weber Compared in the Context of the Augustinian and Lucretian Traditions”, in *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*, ed. S. Loyal and S. Quilley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) has conceptualised this as a dispute between the “Augustinian” and “Lucretian” views of religion. The “Augustinian” view, that religious belief helps to pacify people, represents by far the dominant mainstream of Western thought from St Augustine of Hippo to Max Weber, and it is so much taken for granted by most intellectuals that it is hard to dislodge. The “Lucretian” view takes its name from the first-century BC writer Lucretius, in *De rerum natura*, who anticipated the modern theory of evolution, and attributed religious belief to people’s ignorance of principles underlying life on earth. See Lucretius [Titus Lucretius Carus] *De rerum natura* [*On the Nature of the Universe*] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951).

<sup>133</sup> See Barbara H. Rosenwein, (ed) *Anger’s Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (London: Cornell University Press, 1998) and S. White, “Feuding and Peacemaking in the Touraine around the Year 1100”, *Traditio*, xlii (1986), 195–263.

was calculated to reduce the dangers that warriors posed to each other in the absence of a higher power monopoly. One contention is that in the absence of a higher monopoly of power, displays of anger were designed to alert others to the dangers of not proceeding to search for agreement – specifically the danger of unleashing feuds that could last for generations. Essential though it is to reconsider this question in the light of seven decades of subsequent research by historians since Elias wrote *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, there are *prima facie* reasons for being suspicious of this line of reasoning. If the argument is that displays of anger serve to preserve an existing “social system” – in much the same way that Max Gluckman and Lewis Coser argued concerning the “social functions” of conflict more generally – then it raises all the old problems concerning “functionalist” theories, with their undercurrents of voluntarism, teleology or (at best) evolutionism.<sup>134</sup> Alternatively, the line of reasoning may be taken as something similar to Marsh, Rosser and Harré’s suggestion that football hooliganism is a form of “ritualised aggression” and that it is not usually seriously violent except to the extent that official intervention distorts it and prevents it from taking its “normal” form.<sup>135</sup> Eric Dunning, co-author with Elias of *Quest for Excitement*, has taken trenchant issue with that view, on the basis of his own studies of sports-related hooliganism over several decades.<sup>136</sup> In any case, the idea that medieval people used anger as a kind of

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<sup>134</sup> Max Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955), and Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956). For a summary of this ancient controversy, see Stephen Mennell, *Sociological Theory: Uses and Unities* (London: Nelson, 1974), 141–67.

<sup>135</sup> Peter Marsh, Elizabeth Rosser and Rom Harré, *The Rules of Disorder* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

<sup>136</sup> Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing*

stabilising ritual appears to be called in question by Willem Mastenbroek's studies of the long-term development of negotiation: as he shows, medieval negotiations between warriors quite often broke down and resulted in fatalities.<sup>137</sup> Reference to the researches of Dunning and Mastenbroek makes an important point. Those social scientists whose work is strongly influenced by Elias's are sometimes criticised for not taking sufficient account of historical research in the decades since the publication of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*; but equally, it may be argued that critics of Elias too frequently refer only to *The Civilizing Process* and *The Court Society*, as if Elias had himself written nothing since the Second World War, and refer still less to the considerable body of social scientific and historical work that still continues under his influence, through which his theories have been extended, refined, and sometimes doubt cast on aspects of his theories.

Many have considered the issue of whether an alternative, more successful reading of modern society can be found in the writings of Foucault.<sup>138</sup> A very large literature exists on the subject of changing attitudes to punishment.<sup>139</sup> It is important to stress a point of

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*Process* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008), [Collected Works, vol. 7], 260-90.

<sup>137</sup> Willem Mastenbroek, "Negotiating as Emotion Management" *Theory, Culture and Society*, 16 (1999), 49–73.

<sup>138</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

<sup>139</sup> David Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Victor A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770–1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Pieter C. Spierenburg, "Punishment, Power and History: Foucault and Elias", *Social Science History*, 28 (2004),

convergence between their writings. Both saw modernity as a condition in which agents became increasingly self-regulating and self-monitoring.<sup>140</sup> Foucault famously argued that the process was not the result of the growth of humanitarian impulses but the product of the belief that the state could punish more effectively by punishing less. Elias takes the longer view, showing how attitudes to violence and cruelty altered as people became more interdependent in pacified societies. His argument is that people came to regard certain forms of violence (cat burning, judicial torture, public execution) as disgusting and distasteful – incompatible with how they saw themselves as more civilized than their forbears. Changing forms of punishment need to be seen in that light – not as an outcome of the elite views about the efficacy of making punishment less severe but as the product of long-term changes in the ways in which people were bound together. Those changes had their origins in processes that began well before the period with which Foucault was concerned, that is in the rise of state monopoly powers and in the transformation that occurred subsequently. In *The Spectacle of Suffering*, Spierenburg produces detailed evidence in favour of Elias's view.<sup>141</sup> He argues that executions and other punishments carried out under the public gaze, which became institutionalised in the course of the later Middle Ages, “first served to seal the transfer of vengeance from private persons to the state”. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault depicted the transition from public executions in the eighteenth century to incarceration in the nineteenth as rather abrupt. This picture was derived more from the assumptions of structuralist philosophy than from archival sources. Spierenburg, in contrast, demonstrates from the archives that the

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<sup>140</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 379ff and 432 on the need to “rule people in part through themselves” and Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>141</sup> Spierenburg, *Spectacle of Suffering*, 202.

process was far more gradual. Some mitigation of the more extreme, mutilating punishments can be detected from the early seventeenth century. In most western European countries executions were removed within prison walls during the nineteenth century, and abolished in the twentieth. But over the whole of that period there is clear evidence of a gradual but eventually accelerating increase in sensibility towards the suffering of the victim: “inter-human identification had increased”.<sup>142</sup> Elias therefore offered a more complex picture of longer-term changes in social organisation and in social standards regarding appropriate forms of self-regulation which identified an overall trend towards declining levels of inter-personal violence over the last few centuries (a judgment that has been supported by more recent findings, as discussed by Johnson and Monkkonen, and Eisner).<sup>143</sup>

One of the most distinctive achievements of Elias’s approach is to be found in the claim that domestic and international politics cannot be regarded as separate domains but have interacted with each other to produce fundamental changes in human society, first within Europe and then across the wider world. The argument anticipated more recent sociological attempts to link intra-state and inter-state dynamics in works by Giddens, Mann, Skocpol, Tilly, Wallerstein and others that have all failed to engage with Elias’s perspective.

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<sup>142</sup>Spierenburg, *Spectacle of Suffering*, 184; see however Gatrell, *Hanging Tree* on the role of the upper strata’s revulsion at the lower order’s pleasure in the carnivalesque.

<sup>143</sup> E. A. Johnson and E. H. Monkkonen (eds) *The Civilization of Crime: Violence in Town and Country since the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), and Manuel Eisner, “Modernisation, Self-Control and Lethal Violence: The Long-Term Dynamics of European Homicide Rates in Theoretical Perspective”, *British Journal of Criminology*, 41 (2001), 618–38.

But that is not to suggest that Elias's approach to the international is entirely satisfactory. Its main strength was to bring war and geopolitical rivalries to the center of the study of long-term processes of change that affect humanity as a whole. The main weakness was to ignore different ways in which the civilizing process had influenced international relations.<sup>144</sup>

Elias devoted little attention to how the civilizing process found expression in the institutions such as diplomacy that are central to the modern society of states. A writer whom Elias mentions in passing (with respect to manners) is central to further work in this area – François de Callières (1645–1717) whose reflections on diplomacy highlighted the features of court society that were fundamental to diplomacy in a world in which states were increasingly interconnected with and vulnerable to each other.<sup>145</sup> There is no space to develop this point here, but Callières' writings drew attention to the "civilizing" role of diplomacy in an increasingly interdependent system of states. They suggest the need for further research on how the civilizing process influenced what the English School of International Relations calls "international society" – the realm of order and civility that exists even between separate states that are not answerable to any higher power but must rely on their military and political resources for security and survival.

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<sup>144</sup> These questions will be explored at greater length in Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics* (three volumes, in preparation).

<sup>145</sup> François De Callières, *The Art of Diplomacy* [1716] (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983). Callières was a prominent figure in the court of Louis XIV, as his appointment in 1696 as *Ambassadeur Extraordinaire et Plenipotentiaire* indicated. Of particular importance was his defence of standards of diplomatic conduct that drew on court etiquette and ceremony, as discussed in Elias, *Court Society*.

One might also quarrel with the details of Elias's account of the most recent phase of the civilizing process in which the norms of the colonial powers and the norms of the colonised peoples were coming closer together. The role of "the standard of civilization" in the nineteenth century is important for future attempts to extend Elias's argument. The standard formulated the practices that non-European societies had to acquire before admission as equals into the society of states could be contemplated. The standard demonstrates one of Elias's main contentions, which is that during the eighteenth century the Europeans came to think that civilization was not a process but a condition that was part of their natural endowment – and from that point on, they assumed the right to civilize others, to mould them in the image of the European or Western powers.

The importance of civilized norms for world politics was evident in many other domains in the twentieth century. The idea of the "practices of civilized nations" had been invoked by those who argued for establishing an international tribunal to investigate war crimes at the end of the First World War.<sup>146</sup> It was no less central to the discourse used in establishing the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials. Characterisations of the "axis of evil" and the cruelty of regimes (such as Saddam Hussein's) indicate how notions of civilization have been woven into foreign policy discourse.<sup>147</sup> Here one might note one of the ambiguities of civilization – that it is simultaneously the source of order between certain societies, or a means of conveying aspirations for a more peaceful world, and a resource for engaging in

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<sup>146</sup> J. F. Willis, *Prologue to Nuremberg: The Politics and Diplomacy of Punishing War Criminals of the First World War* (Westport Connecticut: Westwood Press, 1982).

<sup>147</sup> Jack Donnelly, "Human Rights: A New Standard of Civilization?", *International Affairs*, 74 (1998), 1-23.

rivalries. Elias referred to the work that needed to be done to create rules of co-existence between different societies.<sup>148</sup> The issue is how far civilizing processes in different regions (which have been shaped by contact with outsiders) can find common ground in a global civilizing process. On the one hand, lengthening webs of interconnectedness associated with what Elias called “functional democratization” – relatively more equal power ratios between people and groups in a chain of interdependence – created pressures to display greater foresight and restraint; they created the possibility of “diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties” at the global level. On the other hand, group fears that encroaching external influences will erode power and autonomy kept alive the possibility of disintegration. Moreover, it has been argued that partial trends towards functional democratisation can co-exist with others towards “functional de-democratization” – greater inequalities of power and resources which, especially where Anglo-Saxon market fundamentalism has been most influential, may be associated with *diminishing* foresight.<sup>149</sup> Elias refers, albeit in passing, to the challenges that lie ahead. That is not the least of the reasons for arguing that his analysis of the impact of the European civilizing process on the overall transformation of human society is as valuable today as it was seven decades ago when it was first published.

## **Conclusion**

There are various points that can be drawn from Elias’s work: the stress on the processual (that is, on the interwoven developments that societies, their main institutions, codes of behaviour and so forth undergo over long-term horizons, whether decades or centuries); the emphasis on the need to understand the complex interactions between social-structural

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<sup>148</sup> Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 410.

<sup>149</sup> Stephen Mennell, *The American Civilizing Process* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 305–14.

changes, and the everyday world of the “*habitus*”, and personality structures; the advice to beware of false dichotomies (individual and society, agent and structure, the ideational and the material, the domestic and the international and so forth) that are responsible for limiting advances in the social sciences; the analysis of relations between domestic and international politics as part of the investigation of long-term processes in the transformation of human society. Those themes amount to an attempt to recover the more holistic conceptions of social science which had been defended by the founding figures of sociology in the nineteenth century – a recovery that does not remain tied to the innocence of so much thinking in that period, one that distances itself from commitments to progress and teleology that rightly brought the grand meta-narratives into disrepute. *The Civilizing Process* was an exemplary statement of what Elias would later call the “higher-level synthesis” that avoided the shortcomings of much historical narrative.<sup>150</sup> The larger synthesis provided an account of the growth of human interconnectedness over the millennia, and an explanation of resulting pressures to become attuned to others over greater distances. It was designed to cast light on how human societies might yet exercise greater control over unplanned processes that seem to stand over them and appear certain to increase in the coming phases of global integration. That was one reason for the claim – which is endorsed here – that Elias’s mode of inquiry had the “right of way” over other perspectives.<sup>151</sup> Whatever the criticisms and reservations, one will struggle to find a deeper and more inspiring vision of what the social sciences can be and might become – a vision that is applicable, in general outline, to many of its sub-divisions, one that reveals how they might be drawn together along with the most innovative work in

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<sup>150</sup> Elias, *Court Society*, 3–38.

<sup>151</sup> Richard Kilminster, “Introduction to Elias”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 4: 2–3 (1987), 215.

history and theory in more complex wholes rather than left to flow along separate, unrelated rivulets.